

Message Text

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ORIGIN AF-03

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 /004 R

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DRAFTED BY: AF/E:GWSCOTT:NB

APPROVED BY: AF/E:RSBARRETT

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P 132032Z MAY 76

FM SECSTATE WASHDC

TO AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO PRIORITY

UNCLAS STATE 111687

FOLLOWING REPEAT STATE 116687 ACTION ADDIS ABABA INFO KHARTOUM
12 MAY

QUOTE

UNCLAS STATE 116687

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PFOR, ET, US

SUBJECT: NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE ON ATTACK ON ERITREAN
REBELS

1. NEW YORK TIMES, IN FRONT PAGE ARTICLE MAY 12 BY
DAVID BINDER, QUOTES ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS AS SAYING
ETHIOPIAN MILITARY GOVERNMENT PREPARING TO OPEN MAJOR
OFFENSIVE AGAINST ERITREAN REBELS IN NEXT FEW DAYS,
USING HALF OF ARMY AND TENS OF THOUSANDS OF ARMED
PEASANT VOLUNTEERS (IPS SENDING EXCERPTS ADDIS AND
KHARTOUM VIA USINFO).

2. FOLLOWING PRESS GUIDANCE PREPARED FOR DEPARTMENT
SPOKESMAN ON "IF ASKED BASIS." SUBJECT NOT RAISED AT
DEPARTMENT BRIEFING BUT AF OFFICERS USED GUIDANCE IN
RESPONDING TO TELEPHONE INQUIRIES FROM AMERICAN AND
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BRITISH JOURNALISTS. POSTS MAY USE GUIDANCE IN THIS

MANNER. (BEGIN TEXT)

Q: WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE ARTICLE IN THE NEW YORK TIMES THIS MORNING ABOUT ETHIOPIAN PREPARATIONS FOR A NEW OFFENSIVE IN ERITREA?

A: WE HAVE SEEN THE ARTICLE AND IT GENERALLY CHECKS OUT WITH THE INFORMATION WE HAVE RECEIVED FROM THE FIELD.

Q: WHAT DO WE THINK ABOUT SUCH AN OFFENSIVE AND WHAT ARE WE DOING ABOUT THESE REPORTS?

A: AS WE HAVE SAID BEFORE WE FAVOR A NEGOTIATED SOLUTION TO THE ERITREAN PROBLEM AND HAVE MADE THIS VIEW KNOWN TO ALL PARTIES.

Q: HAVE WE ADVISED THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT TO CALL OFF THIS OFFENSIVE?

A: I CAN'T GO INTO OUR CONFIDENTIAL DISCUSSIONS WITH THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT. OUR POSITION ON THE DESIRABILITY OF A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT IS WELL KNOWN, HAVING BEEN ANNOUNCED HERE IN MARCH OF LAST YEAR.

Q: WILL THIS OFFENSIVE, IF IT TAKES PLACE, HAVE AN EFFECT ON OUR MILITARY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM?

A: I CAN'T SPEAK OF THAT AT THIS TIME. THE ARMS WE HAVE BEEN SUPPLYING TO THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT SINCE 1953 CAN BE USED, UNDER THE TERMS OF THE APPLICABLE EXECUTIVE AGREEMENT, FOR DEFENSE AGAINST EXTERNAL ATTACK AND FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF INTERNAL SECURITY. WHILE WE DEPLORE THE USE OF U.S.-PROVIDED ARMS IN CIVIL STRIFE, AND PARTICULARLY WHEN IT BRINGS SUFFERING TO CIVILIANS, WE HAVE TO RECOGNIZE THE RIGHT OF A GOVERNMENT TO MAINTAIN ITS TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY. I ALSO NOTE THAT THAT ARTICLE INDICATES THAT MUCH OF THE WEAPONRY TO BE USED BY SO-CALLED PEASANT VOLUNTEERS IN ERITREA IS NOT OF AMERICAN ORIGIN.

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Q: IS THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT ACTIVELY PURSUING A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT AT THE SAME TIME THAT IT IS PREPARING THIS OFFENSIVE?

A: YES, WE BELIEVE IT IS. THE ETHIOPIAN ACTING CHIEF OF STATE, GENERAL TEFERI BANTE, IN HIS MAY DAY MESSAGE, EMPHASIZED THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT'S WILLINGNESS TO GRANT ERITREA AND OTHER ETHIOPIAN NATIONALITIES A LARGE

DEGREE OF AUTONOMY AND INVITED THE ERITREANS TO JOIN IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEW ETHIOPIAN SOCIALIST STATE. THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT IS STILL PURSUING SUDANESE PRESIDENT NIMERIFI'S INITIATIVE TO GET NEGOTIATIONS STARTED. WE UNDERSTAND THAT ONE OBSTACLE TO SUCH NEGOTIATIONS HAS BEEN THE INABILITY OF THE COMPETING ERITREAN LIBERATION GROUPS TO GET TOGETHER AND FORM A UNITED FRONT, IN SPITE OF EFFORTS (SOME OF THEM QUITE RECENT) TOWARD THAT END. THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT ALSO HAS BEEN IN CONTACT WITH LEADING ERITREAN PERSONALITIES IN ASMARA ATTEMPTING TO HAVE THEM PERSUADE THE INSURGENTS TO NEGOTIATE.

Q: WHAT DO THE INSURGENTS WANT? WHAT IS THEIR CASE?

A: THE INSURGENTS HAVE SO FAR INSISTED THAT THEY WILL SETTLE FOR NOTHING LESS THAN COMPLETE INDEPENDENCE. HOWEVER, ERITREA HAS NEVER BEEN INDEPENDENT. ERITREA'S LOCATION ON THE RED SEA HAS SUBJECTED IT TO VARIOUS FOREIGN INFLUENCES. INCLUDING A 50 YEAR PERIOD OF COLONIZATION BY ITALY. THE PROVINCE WAS ADMINISTERED BY THE BRITISH FROM 1941 UNTIL 1952 WHEN THE UNITED NATIONS ESTABLISHED A FEDERAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA. THIS RELATIONSHIP WAS DISSOLVED IN 1962 WHEN ERITREA BECAME A PROVINCE OF ETHIOPIA.
KISSINGER UNQUOTE
ROBINSON

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PRESS COMMENTS, COMBAT OPERATIONS, ERITREA, TERRORISTS, UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 13 MAY 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: n/a
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: n/a
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment:
Disposition Date: 01 JAN 1960
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976STATE111687
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: AF/E:GWSCOTT:NB
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760185-0567
From: STATE
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760558/aaaabxgm.tel
Line Count: 141
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ORIGIN AF
Original Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: n/a
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: CollinP0
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 18 JUN 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <18 JUN 2004 by wolfsd>; APPROVED <24 JAN 2005 by CollinP0>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE ON ATTACK ON ERITREAN REBELS
TAGS: PFOR, ET, US
To: MOGADISCIO
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006